

## LESSON 2: BECOMING A BETTER WRITER



*autobiography*  
*bibliography*  
*body*  
*conclusion*  
*entice*  
*information cards*  
*introduction*  
*plagiarism*  
*source cards*  
*supplemental*  
*material*  
*thesis statement*

### INTRODUCTION

Writing is one of the acts or processes used to exchange ideas. When all is working well, when sentences are grammatically correct, when words are carefully chosen, when paragraphs are soundly structured, communication is usually successful. Someone or some people will read your sentences, understand your meaning, and respond accordingly.

Writing is one of the most important means of communication, so your writing must be simple, readable, and understandable. With a little practice and desire, writing is an art that anyone can master. Your writing will take many forms. In school, you will often have to write papers for your classes. These may include term papers, biographies, or an **autobiography**.

In order to write well, you must first define the purpose of your writing, organize your thoughts, and make an outline — now, you are ready to write. This process is not

always easy, but it is easier than you may think. All it takes is the desire to write clearly, to hard work, and to follow a few guidelines.

### THE BASICS OF WRITING

Writing a paper is a lot like writing a speech. You must first decide upon a topic, research the topic, and organize your material. Once you have organized your material, you are in a position to begin writing your paper. The elements of a paper are also similar to those of a speech. You should have an **introduction**, **body**, and a **conclusion**. As you continue to read, you will see how similar these elements really are to a speech.

### RESEARCH

Research is probably the most important part of your paper. When you begin your research, be determined to find all the information you can. However, be sure that the information you select is accurate and relevant to your topic.

You may want to start your research at the school library. Carry 3X5 cards with you so that you can use them as **source cards** or **information cards**. Then, for each book or reference that you find on your topic, use the source cards to correctly record the title, author or authors, publisher, copyright date (usually just the year), and place of publication (city and state). Not only do these source cards help you to keep track of where your information came from, but they are the basis for your **bibliography** when you finish your paper. Later you can organize your bibliography by alphabetizing your source cards. Give each source card a code such as a number or letter. Place the code in the upper left-hand corner.

After you have your books, magazines, articles, etc. recorded on source cards,

begin recording notes from these books on new 3X5 cards, which become your information cards. Write your code numbers from your source cards on the upper left-hand corner of your information cards so that you can identify which notes came from which publication. Also, write on your information cards the number of the page on which you found the notes.

After researching your topic at the school library, you may want to venture out to other libraries, such as the city or county library, looking for **supplemental materials**. When you have finished this library work, do not stop your research. Contact experts on your subject and set up interviews with them. This can be exciting because you are gathering more information for your paper and you are also meeting new people and establishing contacts. Perhaps you can also look for reliable sources on the Internet.

Although research is sometimes a frustrating process, it is important to stick with it. Be curious and always open to new ideas. Through your research, you will discover the main theme of your paper and experience one of the joys of learning.

### *ORGANIZATION*

Once you have completed your research, you should be able to develop the main point of your paper. This main point is like the specific purpose of a speech. The main point of a paper is called a **thesis statement**.

Now you are ready to develop your outline. Take your information cards and place them in related groups. Arrange the related groups in the order in which you think they should logically appear in your paper. Experiment with different types of order or arrangements. Rearrange and regroup them as often as necessary. If you have time, put your

cards away for a night and rework them the next day. Remember, this outline does not have to be exact. You can still be flexible at this point. After all, you are looking for the best way to present the material you collected.

Finally, when you finish arranging your information cards based on your initial thoughts about the topic, begin writing the outline. The outline allows you to organize your thoughts and record them on paper. The most traditional outline is the Roman numeral/capital letter style outline. However, you do not have to use this type. If you are more comfortable with another type of outline, by all means, use it. Your outline (any style) is far too important to confuse matters by using an unfamiliar or cumbersome format.

### *WRITING YOUR PAPER*

After completing your research and organization, you are ready to begin writing the paper. As mentioned earlier, your paper needs an introduction, body, and a conclusion.

#### *Introduction*

Your introduction grabs the reader's attention and introduces the topic. It is important to **entice** your readers into your paper, so make sure you have a catchy, exciting, and well-organized introduction.

#### *Body*

The body of your paper is where you explain and document what you know about the subject based on your research. Tell the readers your main points (which should support your thesis statement). Then, support these main points with examples and facts.

Use one idea per paragraph. Your information cards should help you do this and

your outline should help you to stay organized and on track with your topic. The first time you write the paper should be nothing more than a rough draft. Therefore, do not worry too much about grammar and spelling; you will be revising this draft — maybe several times — so worry about those details later. In your first draft, you are still looking at presenting the information in the most logical order. Then, in later drafts, you can rearrange the order, as necessary, add or delete information, and correct the grammar and spelling.

### Conclusion

Your conclusion is the last opportunity for you to tell the readers what you want them to remember. Use this space to pull your paper together and to leave the reader with a sense of accomplishment.



### REWRITES

After you have completed your first draft, rewrite and revise your paper. Then, rewrite your paper again, if time permits. Rewriting is a major part of the development

of your paper. *Do not ignore this step!* Try to leave at least one day between revisions. When you leave time between rewrites, you are able to review your work with a fresh state of mind. Use rewrites to reword your material and to polish your grammar and spelling.

Have others review your work. They can help find errors and clarify comments.

### PLAGIARISM

**Plagiarism** is illegal. It is the stealing of someone else's work or ideas without giving them the proper credit or, in some cases, obtaining permission to use the material. You can commit plagiarism by simply, and in many instances unintentionally, copying someone else's ideas, words, or pictures/graphic illustrations.

In order to avoid plagiarism, always give the appropriate credit to every resource you used when writing the paper. The most common ways to give credit are to use footnotes, endnotes, quotation marks (mentioning the source), or a bibliography. Refer to your English textbook or to a writing style handbook for suggestions on formats. Whichever system you use, you will find the information on your source cards very helpful.

### PRINCIPLES OF WRITING

As a writer, there are six principles that you should use as a guide when writing. By adhering to these six principles, you will be able to keep your writing focused on the topic, written to the correct target audience, concise, complete, logically arranged, and grammatically correct. These principles are: audience level, accuracy, brevity and completeness, clarity, coherence, and unity.



### *AUDIENCE LEVEL*

When you write, you should do so for a particular audience — just like you would for a speech. Although most of your writing in high school will be assignment-related, you may have the opportunity to write articles for the school paper or yearbook, reports for an after school club, or flyers for your after school job. Because of the different audiences these items would reach, you would not write them in the same manner. Instead, you would tailor them to each audience.

Additionally, be careful not to write at too high or too low of a level for your audience. This may seem hard to do, but it is extremely important. The purpose of your writing is to explain your topic or to present information, not to prove how much you know or how little you may think your reader knows about the subject. It is not your job to criticize, judge, or alienate the audience.

### *ACCURACY*

Your work must be free of factual and mechanical errors. It should represent only essential and accurate facts. Correct use of grammar, punctuation, and spelling will also contribute to clarity and understanding.

### *BREVITY AND COMPLETENESS*

Include in your paper only the information that is essential or pertinent to cover the topic. In other words, keep your writing brief and to the point. Do not stray from your main point — that only distracts the reader and could take attention away from your desired outcome or conclusion. To cover a subject completely while keeping the length of the paper to the absolute minimum requires careful analysis and many rewrites. However, never sacrifice clarity or completeness just to gain brevity.

### *CLARITY*

You must make a special effort to keep your writing clear, crisp, and fully understandable. Ensure that your readers understand your intention. Do not try to impress them with your vocabulary. The best way to obtain clarity in your writing is by practicing the following guidelines:

- Use short sentences.
- Avoid explaining something that the reader already knows.
- Use simple, familiar words to describe objects. Also, avoid vague words that do not relate precisely to your topic.
- Use verbs in the active tense. For example, instead of “The ball was thrown by John,” write “John threw the ball.”
- Avoid long phrases when one or several words will do and avoid wordiness (or the use of unnecessary words). For example, use “now” instead of “at the moment.”
- Select words and phrases that express your exact meaning and can have only one interpretation.

- Use words that bring an image to mind. If a reader can picture something, he or she will have a better chance of understanding what you are trying to write.

Because of the importance of writing grammatically correct work, common errors in grammar are described in detail later in this lesson.

### *COHERENCE*

Coherence is the logical development and arrangement of a subject. You can achieve coherence by thinking the subject through and seeing it as a whole before you arrange the parts logically and begin writing. Using your outline and rewrites will help you to achieve coherence.

### *UNITY*

Your writing must adhere to a single main idea. Apply this principle not only to each sentence and paragraph, but to the entire paper.



### **GRAMMATICAL ERRORS**

When a piece of writing is flawed, the process of communication breaks down; the

transfer of information stops as the reader tries to translate your meaning.

There are many flaws that can damage your writing; among the most serious are ungrammatical sentences. Grammatical errors include fragments, run-on sentences, subject/verb agreement, shifts in person, number, tense, voice, tone, and faulty pronoun reference.

### *FRAGMENTS*

A sentence is an independent clause, which can stand alone. It has a subject (tells what or whom the sentence is about) and a predicate (tells what the subject does). A fragment is a dependent clause (a word group that lacks a subject or a predicate).

- Here is an example of a fragment:  
“in the basement and in the attic”
- Here is an example of a complete sentence:  
“We searched for the missing book in the basement and the attic.”

### *RUN-ON SENTENCES*

A run-on sentence occurs if two or more independent clauses are joined without a conjunction (joining word such as “and” or “but”) or appropriate punctuation.

- Here is an example of a run-on sentence:  
“Organize a résumé according to your education, work experience, career objectives, and recreational interests review your needs carefully before stating a career objective.”
- Here is an example of the correct way to write this:  
“Organize a résumé according to your education, work experience, career

objectives, and recreational interests. Review your needs carefully before stating a career objective.”

In the second example, the run-on sentence is written in two complete sentences.

- Sometimes a conjunction is used to connect two related clauses.

“A good résumé will include carefully chosen detail, *and* it will create an impression of depth without overwhelming the reader with your life history.”

### SUBJECT/VERB AGREEMENT

Subjects and verbs agree with one another in number (singular or plural) and person.

Agreement as to number means that the verb may have a different spelling, depending on whether the subject is singular (one) or plural (more than one).

- Here is a singular example:  
“The musician *is* a professional.”
- Here is a plural example:  
“The musicians *are* professional.”

The verb in the above examples changed when the subject went from singular to plural.

Person is a term that indicates whether the subject is the one speaking (first person); the one spoken to (second person); or the one spoken about (third person).

- First person      I walk to the store
- Second person    You drive to the store
- Third person      Joey runs to the store

### SHIFTS

A shift, as defined in grammar, is an abrupt change of perspective within a sentence (or between sentences).

- A shift in person would be:  
“People are tempted to go off *their* diets when *we* go on vacation.”  
This is a shift from third person (“people”) to first person (“we”) within the same sentence.
- A shift in number would be:  
“If the *books* belong to the boy, return *it*.”  
The previous sentence is a shift from plural (“books”) to singular (“it”) within the same sentence.
- A shift in tense changes when the time of an action changes (past, present, future). An example of a shift in tense would be:  
“Mrs. Hopkins *arrives* at her desk and *went* directly to work.”  
The sentence above is a shift from present tense (arrives) to past tense (went).
- Voice is a term that indicates whether the writer has emphasized the doer of the action (active voice) or the receiver of the action (passive voice). Avoid shifting voices within a sentence.  
“We went to the post office (active) and the letters were mailed (passive).”  
One way to write this using only active voice is:  
“We went to the post office and mailed the letters.” “We” took the action of going to the post office and mailing the letters.
- A shift in the tone of your writing can also confuse your readers. Tone refers to the quality of language (word choice, sentence structure) that creates for your

reader an impression about your work and you, the writer. Your tone may be formal or informal. Once you adopt a certain tone, use it consistently.

“In your letter of May 16, 2001, you requested that we pay the balance of our bill, in the amount of \$25.31. You know, if you people would get your act together and correct the problems we told you about, maybe you would get your money.”

The paragraph above shows a shift from formal to informal.

### FAULTY PRONOUN REFERENCE

A *noun* is a word that names a person, place, or thing. A *pronoun* is a word used in place of a noun. Pronouns help avoid unnecessary repetition in our writing.

- Repetitive:

“Although Seattle is damp, Seattle is my favorite city.”

- Using a pronoun:

“Although Seattle is damp, it is my favorite city.”

Pronoun reference is a term that describes the relationship between a pronoun and its noun.

Noun      ←      Pronoun

*The gentleman* bowed to *his* partner.

In order for a pronoun to function correctly, it must refer clearly to a well-defined noun, as in the example above. *His* can refer to only one noun in the sentence, *gentleman*. When a pronoun does not refer clearly to its noun, readers will be confused.

- Incorrect:

“Mr. Jones extended an invitation to Mr. Smith after *he* returned from *his* trip.” It is not clear who took the trip.

- Correct:

“After *Mr. Jones* returned from *his* trip, he extended an invitation to Mr. Smith.” Here, Mr. Jones clearly was the traveler.



### WRITING MORE CLEARLY

Writing a grammatically correct sentence is no guarantee that you will communicate effectively. Grammatically correct writing can still be unclear. Once you are confident that your sentences are grammatically correct, examine your choice of words.

Have you expressed yourself clearly? Have you avoided using jargon that may make your meaning unclear? Have you refrained from overusing *to be* or *to have* as main verbs? Have you chosen the better voice for your verb? Learning about these choices and thinking about them when you write, will improve the clarity of your writing.



## WORDINESS

Delete words, phrases, and clauses that do not add directly to the meaning of a sentence. Try to be less wordy and more to the point. Say your sentences to yourself with fewer words and see if the meaning stays the same. If so, use the version with fewer words.

- Wordy sentence:  
“Under all circumstances and in every case, always check the oil level in your car when you stop at a service station.”
- To the point:  
“Always check the oil level of your car when you stop at a service station.”

## JARGON

Jargon consists of “shorthand” words, phrases, or abbreviations that are known only to a relatively small group of people. You should avoid jargon for two reasons.

1. Your audience may not understand what you are saying or writing.
2. Your message will be unclear when you rely on overused phrases as a substitute for original thinking.

Always choose your words carefully and know what they mean. Do not depend on phrases that add syllables but not substance.

- Jargon-Filled:  
Semi permanent dyadic relationships provide the adolescent with the opportunities for trialing that make for a more secure union in the third and fourth decades.
- Jargon-Free:  
Going steady when you are a teenager helps prepare you for marriage later on.

## OVERUSE OF “TO BE” AND “TO HAVE”

Relying too heavily on forms of “to be” and “to have” as main verbs will diminish the effectiveness of your sentences. These words lack force as main verbs. These words do not establish for a reader the clearest possible relationship between the subject of a sentence and its predicate. When possible, substitute a verb that more clearly expresses action than “to be” or “to have.”

- Weak  
“Ms. Smith was at the office door.”
- Improved  
“Ms. Smith stood at the office door.”

## ACTIVE AND PASSIVE VOICE SENTENCES

Sometimes the same sentence can be written in more than one way. Consider the following:

- “The lawyer had won the case.”
- “The case had been won by the lawyer.”

The first example emphasizes the lawyer. It tells you something about the lawyer. The lawyer is the subject of the sentence. Since the lawyer is the one that did something (won the case), and you are writing about the lawyer, this is called active voice.

The second example emphasizes the case. It tells you something about the case. The case is the subject of the sentence. Since the case is the object that had something done to it (it was won by the lawyer), and you are writing about the case, this is called passive voice. Here is another example:

- Active: “Babe Ruth hit the ball.”
- Passive: “The ball was hit by Babe Ruth.”



The passive voice is less direct and less forceful than the active voice. Use the active voice whenever possible, unless it does not convey the meaning you intended.

## ORGANIZING A PARAGRAPH

A paragraph is a collection of sentences logically arranged and focused on a narrowly defined topic. Like sentences, paragraphs rarely occur alone. They are parts of larger units: the business letter or the memorandum or the essay for school.

Learning about the composition of paragraphs is important in that the success of any larger form is entirely dependent on the success of its component parts. A letter will fail to communicate if any of its paragraphs is poorly structured or poorly developed.

### *THE TOPIC SENTENCE*

The topic sentence tells the reader the main idea of the entire paragraph. The topic sentence should be just broad enough and narrow enough to allow approximately five to seven sentences about the topic. Depending on the topic, there could be more sentences. If some of your sentences are about a different subject, perhaps you should be starting a new paragraph with a new topic sentence.

Use topic sentences as an aid in organizing your writing. When you properly focus a topic sentence, you have a solid basis upon which to include or exclude information as you write a paragraph.

A good topic sentence also enables the reader to anticipate the contents of a paragraph and thus to follow your ideas as they are expressed.

## CONCLUSION

Communication is how we transfer ideas among ourselves. Communication does not always work. Your message has to be perceived the way you intended it to be perceived.

You must understand your audience and your purpose. You should conduct research and support your ideas. You should decide on an organization for your information and outline your ideas.

Once you start writing, you need to understand some fundamentals of the English language. In order for people to respect and respond to your message, they must not be distracted by poor writing or inappropriate language. Follow the basic rules and people will pay attention to your ideas, and be impressed by your ability to express yourself.